University of North Carolina at Asheville
Journal of Undergraduate Research
Asheville, North Carolina
April 2018

Robert Frank's *The Americans:* Examining the Meta-pictorial Frame

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Abstract

This paper will examine embedded compositional frames in photographer Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1955-1957) as meta-pictorial and self-reflexive tools that combine mediality, compositional isolation and visual ellipsis in order to expose the fallacies of mid-century American idealism. Frank is often considered one of the most influential photographers of the twentieth century, yet current analysis of his framing focuses on his use of the frame merely as a compositional choice. Rather than suggesting that Robert Frank's use of the frame is derived heavily from the work of his mentor Walker Evans; the scholarship of Jacques Derrida, Victor Stoichitā and Péter Bokody will be used as frameworks for discussing the narrative implications of the frames in *The Americans* as forms of the meta-pictorial frame. By analyzing Frank's photo-series *The Americans,* this paper will aim to establish his use of the meta-pictorial frame as a distinctive tool for illuminating social alienation and a false-sense of freedom in America's nuclear era.

1. Introduction

In the history of art, the frame has played a pivotal role in establishing the boundary between imagined space and reality, but its significance in art extends far beyond this base function. The conceptual significance of the frame (as a physical boundary of the image and embedded into the work itself) has evolved through various genres and mediums of artistic expression, and has created a wide array of possibilities for altering its function, presence and meaning. Throughout his career Robert Frank combined his focus on documentary photography with his interest in the many functions of the frame, which allowed him to explore the psychological implications of exposing an image as a cropped perspective of the world. In his notable series *The Americans* (1955-1957)*,* Frank experimented with the narrative implications of the frame and used it as a tool to show a "cross-section of the American population."[1] While contemporary scholarship of *The Americans* superficially analyzes Frank's use of the frame as a simple compositional choice, this paper argues that Frank intentionally uses the self-reflexive potential of the embedded frame in three forms – the insertion of secondary photographs, the frame as a metaphor of social isolation, and the frame as visual ellipsis – to create a larger social criticism of division and isolation in atomic age America.

2. The *Meta-pictorial Frame* in Art

At first glance the relationship between an image and its frame seems relatively straightforward: the frame, at its most basic function, delineates between that which is image and that which is "non-image."[2] However, the frame itself has a far more complex role than one might anticipate. In his essay "Margins," art historian Victor Stoichita analyzes the frame as both an object of the physical world and a symbolic boundary between reality and the fictive world of the image.[3] Although it has the ability to delineate between these two realms, Stoichita argues that the frame transcends the possibility of belonging to either. He suggests that while the frame is physically attached to the image, it cannot

be classified as part of the image; similarly, while the frame is an object of the real world its existence is legitimized solely by its association to the image.[4]

Attempts to categorize the frame are further complicated by the depiction of frames within the image. This inclusion of an embedded frame, also known as the *meta-pictorial frame*, can be traced in art from the early Renaissance through contemporary art. For example, Renaissance artists such as Jan Gossarert (also known as Mabuse, 1478-1532) used embedded *trompe l'oeil* frames to suggest a permeable boundary between the figures within the painting and reality.[5] (Fig. 1) The *meta-pictorial frame* had the most self-reflexive relationship between the actual frame and the image. Not only did it reveal the fictive nature of the image in comparison to the 'realism' of the painted frame, but more importantly, it positioned the painting within the context of the spectator's reception and blurred the boundaries between the created image and reality.[6]

Figure 1. Jan Gossaert (Mambuse), *A Young Princess (Dorthea of Denmark)*, ca. 1530, oil on oak, 38 x 29 cm, National Gallery, London. https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/jan-gossaert-jean-gossart-a-young-princess-dorothea-of-denmark.

Although artistic curiosity with the *meta-pictorial frame* gained popularity in the early years of both the Italian and Northern Renaissances, a critical analysis of the frame's role in art was not established until the fifteenth century. Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472), was the first art theorist to discuss the relationship between the painted canvas and its frame. He established an analysis of the frame by constructing an allegory between the frame and windows.[7] His observations of natural perspective and Renaissance paintings led him to believe that paintings had the ability to represent a world entirely encompassed within the image's frame. Much like windows serve as portals to the outside world, the frame functioned as a portal between the real and represented spaces.

In contemporary scholarship Alberti's conception of the frame as a window has been coined "Albertian Perspective," which describes the frame of a composition as an imagined visual pyramid extending from the eye of the artist to enclose the visible world.[8] This visual pyramid can be understood as a method of perspective that placed the eye of the viewer at the center and horizon of the picture plane, but also established the spatial distance between the painting's objects in relation to the viewer. (Fig. 2) Thus the visual pyramid encompassed the totality of the visual field within the boundaries of the painting's frame. As a result of Alberti's analysis, artists began examining the phenomenological connections to the image's frame by incorporating frames, niches, doors and windows into their work so as to emphasize particular narratives, enhance the *trompe l'oeil* effects in their images and even to comment on the mediality of their work. Each of these illusionary features created new relationships with the painting's physical frame and, in turn, questioned the role of the frame as the 'ontological cut' delineating the image from the non-image.[9]

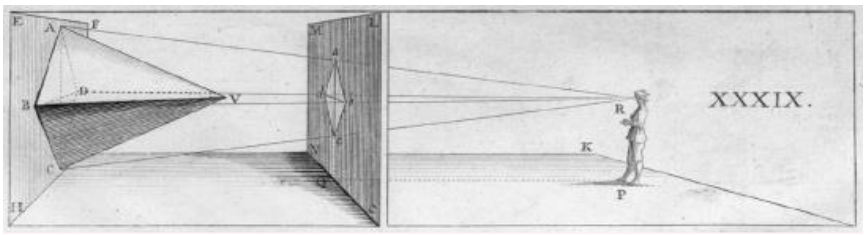

Figure 2. Jean François Nicéron, *Diagram from La Perspective Curieuse,* 1663, engraving. https://thedetachedgaze.com/tag/cone-of-vision/.

While the Renaissance marked the beginning of artistic experimentations with the *meta-pictorial frame*, modernist and *avant-garde* theories from the early twentieth century revitalized artistic interest in exploring the frame's self-reflexive potential. According to art historian Jennifer Mundy, the Surrealist movement conceptualized the frame as window into imagined worlds, as opposed to Alberti's analysis of the frame as a window that enclosed the observable world.[10] She references André Breton's 1928 publication *Le Surréalisme et La Peinture*, in which Breton described the essence of Surrealist paintings:

> It is impossible for me to consider a painting as anything other than a window, where my first concern is to understand what *it looks out on*, in other words, from where I am "the view is beautiful" and I love nothing as much as that which stretches in front of me as far as the eye can see.[11]

Although Breton as the founder of Surrealism was undoubtedly pivotal in establishing how Surrealist painters would conceptualize the frame, Mundy's argument falls short in analyzing the manner in which Surrealist artists such as René Magritte (1898-1967) and Max Ernst (1891-1976) ultimately deconstructed the role of the frame as strict boundary between the image and reality. According to Patricia Allmer, one of the leading scholars on Surrealism, Surrealist painters including Magritte sought to problematize conventional notions of the frame as boundary.

Unlike Mundy, she argues that these artists perceived the frame as an entity that occupied a space of "between-ness," which existed simultaneously inside and outside of the work. Citing images such as Magritte's *La Condition Humaine* (1933), Allmer analyzes the Surrealist conception of the frame and insertion of the *meta-pictorial frame* as an attempt to blur boundaries and create "a dialectical and sometimes unstable interdependency between inside and outside."[12] (Fig. 3) In other words, the Surrealist artists established a new concept of the frame that disrupted traditional notions of a holistic reality by fragmenting the perspective in a manner that problematized the viewer's ability to discern between inside/outside and representation/reality. As a result, these systems of framing exposed the limitations of the painting while also constructing a new "potential site for the generation of meaning."[13]

Figure 3. René Magritte, *La Condition Humaine*, 1933, oil on canvas, 100 x 81 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington. https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.70170.html.

3. New Explorations of the Frame: Photography and Keplerian Perspective

The invention of the camera in the early nineteen-century similarly altered the method of visually framing a composition through the viewfinder on the one hand, while also creating a new understanding of the photographic frame as a site for interpreting meaning on the other. The shift of the visual frame between painting and photography depends mostly on the location of the artist's eye (and subsequently the viewer's) in the composition. This conception of the frame is known as "Keplerian perspective" after Johannes Kepler's study of the eye. In contrast to Alberti's visual pyramid, Keplerian perspective suggests that the photographic frame encloses a "representation of vision."[14] Unlike painting, in early photography there was an assumption that the photograph framed the visible world; more importantly, the photograph was believed to be an objective representation of reality. However, contemporary scholarship on the photographic frame dictates that the photographer's greatest tool is the viewfinder because s/he can manipulate its frame to produce an abstracted and cropped image of reality. Thus, the viewfinder mechanism functions like an empty frame to selectively fragment the composition of the image from the world around it, and expose the limited nature of the image.

Though framing and composition make up the formal elements of a photograph, they do not dictate the representation. In his essay "The Aesthetic Significance of Photographic Representation," aesthetician Jonathan Friday argues that, more often than not, the frame is an experience of the spectator.[15] This is due to the fact that the viewer understands the frame of the photograph as an intentional cropping of reality. The photographer's glance is taken over by the eye of the viewer, and the viewer becomes simultaneously aware that the image is produced but also that the reality of the image extends beyond its edges.[16] The photograph's ability to crop a "representation of vision" is essential for the production of meaning, because it can emphasize particular elements of reality within its frame that might otherwise go unnoticed. It is precisely this aspect of the photographic frame that makes the framing of *The American's* so significant; the viewer (anticipated to be the American public) is now capable of seeing the fallacies of their society through the eyes of an outsider. In Frank's own words: "to see what is invisible to others" or, to illuminate the parts of society that go unseen by those unwilling to look critically.

The relationship between the viewer and the photographic frame can be understood further by examining the very manner with which photography encompasses only a limited moment and space from reality. This in turn inhibits the viewer from interpreting the scene beyond that which is confined by the image's edges.[17] However, philosopher Gilles Deleuze argued that it has an ability to interact with the space beyond its edges despite the popular belief that photography's frame functions as stable boundary between image and non-image. For Deleuze, this interaction produces the potential for photographs to break out from the constraints of the frame and produce new spaces for creating meaning.[18] This relationship between the photograph and the context into which it is placed was further discussed in Roland Barthes' book *Camera Lucida* (1980) in which the "primacy of the visual experience" for photography was established by the "discursive context in which it is embedded."[19] For example, should a photograph be placed next to a text excerpt, the relational proximity between the two will produce a vastly different interpretation of the image, then if it were to stand on its own.

4. Robert Frank's Early Career

The impact of the photograph's visual presentation, and framing as a space for producing meaning, is a reoccurring motif throughout the course of Robert Frank's career. Born in Zurich, Switzerland in 1924, Frank began apprenticeships under two local photographers Hermann Segesser and Michael Wolgensinger after graduating from high school in 1941.[20] The final product of Frank's training in Switzerland was the bound volume of his *40 Fotos*, published in 1946. This series of photographs displays Frank's early artistic influences from modernism, documentary photography, and a fascination with observing the cultural landscape of his environment (Fig. 4). Frank's early photographic output reflects the pivotal elements that would define his later work: the production of photo-volumes, his struggle to validate documentary photography within modernist art, and his desire to capture the essence of societies and spaces around him. However, it is his early adherence to the production of bound photo-volumes (in which images were paired with contrasting blank pages) that would typify Frank's presentation of the image throughout his *œuvre*. Referencing Barthe's analysis of the relationship between image and its discursive context, Frank's use of the spatial juxtaposition between image and non-image became a tool for providing the viewer with space to interpret and absorb the image's meaning.

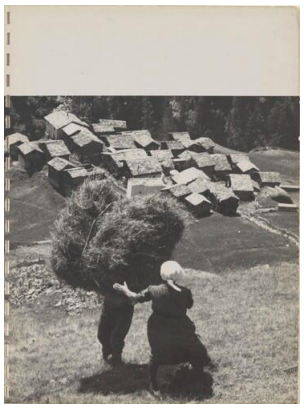

Figure 4. Robert Frank, *40 Fotos p. 10*, 1946, silver gelatin print, 17.8 x 17.2 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington. https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.140038.html.

In 1947, Frank immigrated to New York in order to pursue his photography career, where he worked for prominent publications including *Harper's Bazaar* under the art director Alexey Brodovitch. Although he attained a profitable position at the publication, he quickly became frustrated by the static nature of his work there, and left the publication in order to travel and photograph South America for the next four years. [21] When he returned to New York in 1952, Frank began compiling the photographs from his journey into his second photo volume, titled *Black White and Things*, which traced his travels between Peru, England and France from 1947 to 1952.[22] (Fig. 5) In this series Frank experimented with using the frame in his compositions in order to isolate figures within their larger social contexts thereby focusing on the confinement of figures within rigid socio-economic structures.[23] The impact of framing his subject's societal confinement would pervade Frank's photographs in the most pivotal series of his career, *The Americans,* for which he was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship in 1955 and 1956.

Figure 5. Robert Frank, *Balcony/Valencia* 1952, silver gelatin print, 23.3 x 33.1 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington. https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.78747.html.

In order to further understand the significance of Frank's methods for visually presenting images in *The Americans* to produce forms of social criticism, it is essential to analyze his relationship with the well-renowned photographer Walker Evans. Evans, who had also published a collection of photographs observing the cultural landscape of the United States in his photo-volume *American Photographs* (1938), was naturally an inspiration for a young Frank looking to take on a similar project. The two photographers became acquaintances in 1950, and quickly established a lasting friendship in which Evans played a crucial role in both mentoring Frank and endorsing his photographic projects. Not only did Evans assist Frank in writing his application for the Guggenheim Fellowship in 1955, but he also sat on the board for the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation that ultimately approved the funding for the project.[24]

Although the two photographers had similar goals for producing a series that encompassed the essence of American culture, their methods for capturing these images and their ultimate articulations of American society were substantially different. In his essay, "Robert Frank and Walker Evans," Jeff L. Rosenheim points to Evans' preference for "large-format cameras, subjects that did not move (objects and architecture), and an emotionally cool relationship

between the artist and his quarry."[25] (Fig. 6) According to Rosenheim, this sharply contrasted with Frank's often impulsive and fragmented images that expressed his interest in "dynamic pictorial structure over classical balance, and emotional record over a documentary one."[26] (Fig. 7) Despite their methodological differences, Frank was greatly inspired by Evans' *American Photographs*. Not only did he take a copy of the book with him while he worked on *The Americans*, but he also took thorough notes on the manner in which Evans chose to sequence his images and the sorts of objects he chose to record.[27]

Figure 6. Walker Evans, *Roadside Stand Near Birmingham/Roadside Store Between Tuscaloosa and Greensboro, Alabama*, 1936, silver gelatin print, 18.4 x 19 cm, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/45863/walker-evans-roadside-stand-near-birmingham-roadside-store-between-tuscaloosa-and-greensboro-alabama-american-1936/.

Figure 7. Robert Frank, *Ranch Market – Hollywood*, 1955, silver gelatin print, 23.8 x 35.7 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/265022.

The sequencing and visual presentation of Evans' images in *American Photographs* were ultimately two of the largest influences for Frank's process of conceptualizing the layout and sequence of his work in *The Americans*. He drew from Evans' sequential structure and use of the blank contrasting page as tools for producing narrative progression and spaces for generating meaning; however, Frank also developed his own method for guiding the viewer's interpretation of the images. First, unlike Evans, he divided the series into five thematically differentiated "chapters" – the beginning of each was indicated by an image of the American flag (Fig. 8). Moreover, Frank sequenced his images in a rhythmic visual progression of reoccurring motifs (juxtaposing static images with images of movement, images of looking with images of being seen, and images of people with images devoid of figures).[28] Frank's pairing of opposites throughout the course of *The Americans* produced an interdependency and dialogue between images and thus created a far more fluid and dynamic narrative sequence than Evans' work.

Figure 8. Robert Frank, *Fourth of July, Jay, New York*, 1955, silver gelatin print, 33.9 x 22.5 cm, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago. http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/87163.

5. Using the "Embedded Frame" in *The Americans* (1955-1957)

While Robert Frank has spent his life working with the frame as a tool for capturing time, it is in *The Americans* series that he experiments the most with manipulating the embedded frame. Following the acceptance of his application for the Guggenheim Fellowship, Frank began a two-year road trip across the United States to create his artistic interpretation of "what one naturalized American finds to see in the United States that signifies the kind of civilization born here and spreading elsewhere."[29] Using the very portable and discreetly sized 35mm Leica camera, Frank amassed over 20,000 photographs from this trip. In the end, he carefully selected eighty-three of the images for his photo-volume that he felt most accurately articulated the reality of post-war and nuclear era America.[30] The idea of America represented in this series was that of a culture that despite wealth and propagated optimism, was in fact divided by race and class, and overwhelmed by consumerism, corruption, and a false sense of freedom.[31]

In order to encompass the complex and often contradictory reality of mid-century America, Frank established three different methods of compositional framing that would allow for him to fully explore the essence of American life. The three techniques of *meta-pictorial* framing that occur throughout *The Americans* are first, the inclusion of secondary photographs, also known as marginal images into his compositions; second, the use of architectural surroundings to frame subjects as a metaphor for social isolation; and third, the imposition of frames as a visual ellipsis in order to limit the viewer's comprehension of the narrative without projecting their own objective experience onto the image.[32] While certain images in the volume focus on the use of a single framing technique, many of his compositions tend to combine two or three techniques or overlap the embedded frames in order to create multifaceted and complex narratives. What has made Frank's framing in *The Americans* so significant was his ability to interpret the history of the embedded frame in Western art and to work it into his own modernized methodology by incorporating the frame as a compositional tool that allowed him to create critical images of American society.

6. Framing of Secondary Photographs in *The Americans*

Secondary, or embedded, photographs fulfill a major compositional function in *The Americans*. Photographs such as *Bar – Detroit* (1955) and *Detroit* (1955) exemplify Frank's fascination with using embedded images like advertisements, posters, paintings or photographs as the central subject matter for his compositions (Fig. 9, 10). In *Bar – Detroit* Frank positions himself just below a partition in the bar and focuses the entire composition on the framed portraits of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln that further frame the American flag light between them. Similarly, in *Detroit* he photographs a collaged movie poster, with multiple film-stills from Joan Crawford films inside of a movie theatre. These images exemplify the two self-reflexive functions of the secondary photograph that Frank will explore throughout *The Americans* – using these embedded images as either a central element of the photograph's narrative, or as references to the medium of photography and film.

Figure 9. Robert Frank, *Bar, Detroit*, 1955, silver gelatin print, 23.2 x 34.8 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia. http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/65240.html?mulR=587514636|4.

Figure 10. Robert Frank, *Detroit*, 1955, silver gelatin print. http://www.seraphicpress.com/friday-photos-true-hollywood-confessions-28/robert-frank-detroit1955/.

The self-reflexive and narrative potential of the secondary photograph in *The Americans* is more clearly understood in reference to the history of the embedded image in Western art. Art historian Péter Bokody discusses the compositional significance of the marginal image in his essay "Essential Images-within-Images." Bokody's argument builds upon Jacques Derrida's theories of "Parergon" to construct an understanding of the relationship between the central narrative of the work and the embedded images that reinforce the narrative, where the inclusion of secondary images with narrative significance as "essential images-within-images."[33] He argues that these marginal images are not merely decorative aesthetic accessories, but "have a central role in the iconography of the work, and can provide valuable information about the creation and perception of images."[34] In other words, the marginal image is capable of establishing the central narrative of the composition, as seen in *Bar – Detroit*, where the focus on the two presidential portraits in contrast to the American Flag comments on the iconic relationship between Washington and Lincoln, and the establishment of American democracy. Moreover, the marginal image has the capacity to comment on the production, also known as the mediality, of the photographic image using references to the medium of film as seen in *Detroit*. The various media that Frank selected for these embedded images were abbreviations of American culture and by incorporating them into the larger picture, he was able to contrast the nationalistic and superficial images of American life to its divided and alienated reality.

One of the most obvious examples of Frank's use of the essential marginal image is the photograph *Hoover Dam, Nevada* (1955). (Fig. 11) The photograph has been taken outside of what appears to be a roadside information center near Hoover Dam, indicated by the sign in the background advertising a "Pictorial Tour of the Dam." In the foreground, three postcards are vertically aligned in a stand facing the viewer. Each postcard contains dramatic landscape-oriented photographs that symbolize some of the iconic attractions of Nevada. From top to bottom, these icons include the Grand Canyon, Hoover Dam, and the desert tests of the atomic bomb. Superficially, this image appears to be a mindless snap-shot, but closer observation of the postcard's arrangement suggests that the image was,

in fact, carefully composed by Frank in order to produce a critical dialogue between the subjects of each card as well as to create visual allusions to the sequential narrative structure of film stills.

Figure 11. Robert Frank, *Hoover Dam, Nevada*, 1955, silver gelatin print, 46.2 x 30.9 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington. https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.76880.html.

Frank used a combination of signs, advertisements, posters and photographs to create a sketch of American society, and then also examined the way these 'symbols of culture' shifted depending on geographic region, religion, race, economic class and age. In *Hoover Dam, Nevada* these embedded images (the postcards) were more than just national icons, they represented what could be seen as fallacies within American nationalism. These three chronological images also captured the American hypocrisy between idolizing nature, and controlling or destroying nature. The Grand Canyon epitomizes the grandeur of the American landscape; it is a manifestation of the sublime force of nature, and yet for the American public this landmark is also synonymous with the fantasy of the old West outlaws existing beyond the restraints of society. In sharp contrast to the Grand Canyon's eternally untouched landscape, the Hoover Dam postcard represents man's ability to control nature and assert our prowess over that which we have been told could not be tamed. The Hoover Dam image thus becomes a visual allegory for the colonizing desires of the modern man disguised under the idea of "progress." Finally, the Atomic Bomb postcard becomes the ultimate capstone for man's power over nature - the ability to destroy nature down to its very molecular level.

The iconography of the American West established by these postcard images merges with Frank's interest in using the embedded image to create a sequential character in his work. From *The Americans* onward, he began rejecting the narrative capacity of a single still image, instead he chose to embed a series of photographs into the image in order to "capture a moment from various perspectives and provoke multiple understandings of that particular space in time."[35] The vertical sequence of the postcards relates visually to the design of both photographic contact sheets and film rolls. This reference to the production of photography and the medium of film through the use of the embedded image thus exposes the mediality of the photographic process.[36] Moreover, the visual relationship to film rolls produces a correlation between the plot progression of film and the postcards' narrative sequence that suggests a culmination of American "progress" that ends in destruction.

Washington D.C. Inauguration Day (Fig. 12) is another example of Frank's embedded framing of essential images using photographs within the larger image. Taken during the inauguration of Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1957, this photograph contains three distinctive frames: the frame of the entire image and Frank's gaze are the largest primary frame; the frame of the windows presents a secondary frame and level; and the frame of the poster portraits is the final frame in the sequence. Within the composition there are three floor length windows that visually fragment it, perhaps alluding to a sequential nature visible in many of his later photomontages. Like the windows of Renaissance paintings, the windows also serve to delineate between interior and exterior spaces. Frank complicates this division by also contrasting the real photographed people inside of the restaurant with the photographed portraits displayed on the windows. The large portraits of Eisenhower and Richard Nixon pasted onto these windows are framed by thick, white borders that resemble the white margins that framed Frank's snapshots in his photo-volumes. In a reflexive sense, they emphasize the medium of photography; however, they also establish a critical dialogue about the relationship between the United States' government and its citizens.

Figure 12. Robert Frank, *Washington D.C. Inauguration Day*, 1957, silver gelatin print, 30.6 x 45.6 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington. https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.75117.html.

Two poster-sized official photo portraits of Eisenhower and Vice President Richard Nixon are pasted on the center and left windows. In the instance of the Eisenhower portrait, which occupies the center panel, two smaller photographs are attached on its top and bottom edge. Although these images are difficult to identify based on their size, they are both stylistically identifiable as Frank's photographs based on their documentary style and subject matter. The choice to paste his own images in direct relation to the portrait of Eisenhower creates a juxtaposition between these two styles of photography – the traditional official portrait, and the snapshot images of ordinary citizens. This inclusion of the embedded image comments on the mediality of the photograph; the artificial formality of Eisenhower's portrait is exposed by Frank's naturalistic portrayals of average Americans, and the addition of these photographs reveals the fabricated nature of the greater image.

The embedded images in *Washington D.C. Inauguration Day*, have a complex narrative significance beyond disclosing the mediality of the image. In line with Bokody's argument on the self-reflexive potential of essential marginal images, these photographs seem to have critical narrative implications. Namely, we as the viewer observe Frank's outsider perspective of the relationship between citizen and state. Of the two photos in *The Americans* that included Eisenhower's poster, Frank made the choice to frame both of the images from outside of the building's window, literally situating himself as an outsider looking in.[37] This, coupled with the overwhelming public endorsement of Eisenhower's campaign for re-election, suggests that Frank intended for the image to be a criticism of either Eisenhower, his administration, or his policies. Contemporary historians have analyzed the Eisenhower administration's relationship between the public perception of the President, and the man behind the image. While many citizens praised the President for protecting public interests, Eisenhower himself made his disinterest in public input clear, and on one occasion was quoted as saying:

> I further believe that we must never lose sight of the ultimate objectives we are trying to attain. Immediate reaction is relatively unimportant – it is particularly unimportant if it affects only my current standing in the popular polls.[38]

Perhaps what Frank observed and commented on in this image was the American public's false sense of security and unwavering loyalty to a leader more interested in protecting the interests of his administration. This analysis seems particularly poignant when examining the way Eisenhower and Nixon's portraits are positioned over the average Americans inside of the building. These posters serve as an emblem for the fallacy in the American public's idealization of the President and their role as active participants in the democratic system.

Frank further alludes to this limitation and control of democratic voice under the American government by isolating and immobilizing his central figures with the partitions of the window frames. Each individual is bisected to some degree by the frame of either the poster images or the window frames. The young man seen in the central window, and the young woman in the left window can be further perceived as immobilized by the bottom ledge of window, which visually severs their feet from their bodies in the composition. The extreme bisection of their bodies, in comparison to the professional older man in the right window, may also comment on their lessened voice in comparison to more economically established and socially privileged citizens. Once again, Frank's physical and conceptual location as an outsider establishes a critical gaze towards the systematic categorization of the average American citizen determined by age, gender, race, class, and belief systems.

Frank uses the essential marginal image within his compositions to create compositional dialogues between the mediality of the image and the fallacies of American idealism. In *Hoover Dam, Nevada* Frank's ability to fuse images

of great American icons with a film still progression engenders a sense of bittersweet irony and a critical observation of American idealism. Relating back to his expressed goals to capture the symbols of American culture being spread elsewhere, the compositional choice to emphasize the narrative potential of the postcards suggests a desire on his part to expose the reality of a violent and contradictory understanding of American culture being consumed around the world. Similarly, in *Washington D.C. Inauguration Day* he fuses the self-reflexive nature of the embedded image with a disparaging critique of the relationship between the American citizen and the individuals they elect to lead them. By including marginal images, Frank captures the visual signifiers of American culture, and his observation of how these images are constructed and interacted with in everyday life. What results from this, is an unnerving portrait of America riddled with tension between fundamental idealism and harrowing reality.

7. The Embedded Frame as a Metaphor of Social Isolation in *The Americans*

Another compositional framing choice that Robert Frank utilizes frequently in *The Americans* is confining his subjects into a particular frame as a metaphor for social division and alienation. Frank experiments with architecture, machinery, setting and perspective to isolate the figures within their environment. Using the setting as a means of framing the subject is particularly successful as a metaphor for social isolation, because it traps the individual within their particular environment, and subsequently, their role in society. Politicians are categorically boxed by their platforms, factory workers become part of their machines, and socialites are confined to their glamorous parties.[39] (Fig.13) The frame becomes an obvious tool for imprisoning the subject to their role in society as seen in *Sagamore Cafeteria, New York City*. (Fig. 14) The jukebox and the restaurant booths appear to consume the cafeteria worker, as he sits with his head lowered into his hands. Though he is reading, the physical expression of the man denotes a kind of hopelessness, and his hand blocking the viewer's gaze withdraws him even farther back into the seclusion of his frame. Frank repeats this visual allegory to social confinement to reveal a poetic observation of the unanimous isolation of American society.[40]

Figure 13. Robert Frank, *Political Rally- Chicago*, 1956, silver gelatin print, 47.5 x 31.2 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia. http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/65239.html?mulR=27047.

Figure 14. Robert Frank, *Sagamore Cafeteria, New York City*, 1955, silver gelatin print, 21.9 x 32.9 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.76866.html.

In certain cases this framing method uses pre-existing architectural frames like the windows in *Washington D.C. Inauguration Day*, but other times Frank composes this frame within the setting, using furniture or even other people to confine his figures into their respective social boxes. In *Elevator – Miami Beach* the young female attendant stares disinterestedly from the elevator door. (Fig. 15) The elevator door frames the attendant to her left, while the shadowy profile of the older gentleman to her right confines her into the limited space inside of the elevator. This particular representation, combined with our spatial understanding of an elevator as a box, creates a frame around the young woman in which she is literally and metaphorically boxed and confined by her place in the workforce. From Frank's selected perspective, her apathetic reaction to this encroaching box creates an uncomfortable sensation that she is either unaware of her impending enclosure, or so broken down by the society forcing her into this box that she has stopped resisting.

Figure 15. Robert Frank, *Elevator – Miami Beach*, 1955, silver gelatin print, 23.2 x 33.6 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/265014.

Frank's carefully crafted framing of the elevator attendant is pivotal for establishing the critical commentary of the numerous ways in which American society perpetuates an abysmal divide between the working class and the elite. The combined framing of the elevator door and the ominous man's profile reinforces the idea that the attendant's solitude is both structurally and socially constructed. She is trapped in her physical setting and her social roles. The blurry figures of the man and woman in the fur shawl further enhance the impression of social stratification. Historian George Cotkin describes the photographer's ability to implicate his/her subjects due to the photographer's ability to preserve "in the click of button, a moment of unrefined human nature."[41] In other words, the hotel guests' temporary passing of the elevator attendant without regard has been captured within the image to suggest that they will perpetually be implicated in her isolation. While they, as individuals have the means to move around in society as they wish, the girl in the elevator remains trapped in her box, invisible to those around her.

Writer Jack Kerouac describes the elevator attendant's isolation in his introduction for *The Americans* photo book saying, "That little ole lonely elevator girl looking up sighing in an elevator full of blurred demons, what's her name & address?"[42] It is not only Kerouac's affinity for this particular image that is significant, but more so his criticism of the society that would systematically dehumanize industry workers and isolate the working class into an invisible sub-stratum of society. Kerouac's description simultaneously reinforces Frank's frame between the elevator girl and those "blurred demons" of the elite hotel visitors, while also attempting to dismantle the existing structures that have placed her into this box. He does so by reasserting her humanity, unlike the shadowy figures that pass her by without notice,

he ponders who she might be as an individual when she steps outside of that elevator. What Kerouac observed in this image was Frank's ability to draw out a "sad poem of America onto film."[43] This idea of America, as reiterated by Frank's use of the frame, was one in which the upper class of American society, fueled by material desires, fed off of the livelihood of the working class and stripped workers of their humanity until they became as devoid of emotion as the machines they operated.[44]

The framing of social, racial, and gender inequality is nowhere more eloquently presented than in the selected cover photo for the series, *Trolley-New Orleans*. (Fig. 16) This photograph is a close-up shot of six individuals contained into the five visible window frames of the trolley. The trolley itself is not fully visible within the image's frame and thus the trolley, like the elevator, serves as a transportable box that confines the passengers inside. The containment of the commuters is further visualized by their placement within the trolley's windows. Each of the visible passengers, except for the two children in the central window, are confined within the white bars of their perspective windows. The aesthetic produced by the horizontal sequence of trolley windows imbues the image with a narrative that references both the medium of film/photography, and the existent social divisions of the Jim Crow South.

Figure 16. Robert Frank, *Trolley – New Orleans*, 1955, silver gelatin print, 87.7 x 127.5 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/285923.

The trolley windows, like film stills, use serial imagery to allude to the passing by, or movement of the trolley. The relationship between the trolley and film stills is significant because Frank would later continue to explore the possibility of capturing movement from public transport in *Bus Series* (1958), which coincidentally preceded his shift into cinematography.[45] The sequential structure in his still photographs and his later films relate to one another, because they are reflections of Frank's desire to re-experience memory, recall the sequence of a moment, and ultimately to freeze time.[46] His choice to photograph public transport in *Trolley – New Orleans* is also a reference to this transporting quality of the sequential image that moves the viewer through various emotions. The serial quality of the window frames also enforces the impression of "riding by" as a metaphor for Frank's gaze in *The Americans* as he experienced each of the cities from the perspective of an outsider passing through.[47] Frank's transient identity during his journey across the United States allowed for him to objectively represent the fluidity of American culture as it shifted from place to place, while also contradicting that same culture with the upholding of traditionalist values like racial segregation.

As an outsider to the Jim Crow South, Frank must have perceived this allusion to progression as an ironic contrast to the regressive nature of the Deep South's systematic racial segregation. In this sense, the windows also function as portrait frames, which in sequential order accurately described the South's hierarchy of race and gender during the 1950s. The white man comes before the white woman, who comes before the white children, who subsequently come before the black man and black woman. The pain and despair of the black male immediately draws our attention to the arduous realities of the segregated South. Historian George Cotkin describes the significance of the relationship between the young black male and his compositional confinement, "He is framed, as if in a prison, by the windows of the vehicle, and is thus chained to the social realities of the segregation era."[48] What Cotkin draws out in this analysis is the image's ability to frame people within their own social boundaries in relation to the larger narrative of society – they became a snap shot within the greater image of America as a whole.

Cotkin's analysis of the frame in *Trolley – New Orleans*, also suggests that Frank's affinity for framing social division was a result of his adherence to the existential undercurrents of Beat and Hipster thought. In other words, Frank broke from trends of mainstream culture, in order to capture the "absurd and alienating world of white Americans."[49] While Frank understands this alienation to be a product of white American culture, he also draws attention to the imprisonment of all Americans irrespective of race. While African Americans were relegated to a

"second class" social position, white Americans were equally imprisoned by the "staleness of modern, consumer America."[50] Ultimately, Frank's framing of social isolation perhaps implied a larger criticism of the need for Americans to escape from the prison of modern society.

8. Framing as Visual Ellipsis in *The Americans*

Robert Frank's most philosophically complex use of the frame in *The Americans* is the frame as a visual ellipsis. The visual ellipsis is conceptually derived from the literary ellipsis, a device which "signifies a voluntary omission of a structure, [but] nonetheless does not prevent the production of meaning."[51] In many ways Frank's use of the frame as a visual ellipsis relates to the aspects of the frame defined by Gilles Deleuze in *Cinéma 1: L'Image- Mouvement*. The most prevalent concept that links his analysis of the cinematic frame to Frank's is the notion that "the frame and the framed shot are filmed from a particular position in space to emphasize certain aspects and to control our understanding of the narrative."[52] Although Deleuze is examining the cinematic frame, his understanding of the manner in which perspective and angle can control the viewer's understanding of space, and subsequently the narrative, is essential for informing this analysis of Frank's framing as a visual ellipsis.

Several images from *The Americans* incorporate some form of façade between the subject and the viewer that simultaneously confines the individual in the photograph, but also differentiates the subject from the viewer. (Fig. 17) In many ways this technique seems similar to Frank's framing as a metaphor for social alienation; however, the frame in this case has a far more conceptual significance. This particular method limits the viewer's accessibility to subject- the individual is off-centered, partially hidden or eerily cropped by the image. The fragmented compositional elements seen in *Navy Recruiting Station, Post Office – Butte, Montana* and *Parade – Hoboken, New Jersey* serve two purposes: reinforcing the sensory effect and narrative power of the subject's space and creating a visual obstacle that the viewer must overcome in order to understand the image's meaning.[53] (Fig. 18, 19) From the Deleuzian perspective, this framing technique conforms to the self-reflexive tendencies of the *meta-pictorial frame* by underscoring the "centrality of the 'I' or the 'we' through the use of the frame as a means of establishing a dialectic of presence and absence."[54]

Figure 17: Robert Frank, *Rooming House – Bunker Hill, Los Angeles*, 1956, silver gelatin print, 35.56 x 27.94 cm, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco. https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/2001.177.

Figure 18: Robert Frank, *Navy Recruiting Station, Post Office – Butte, Montana*, 1956, silver gelatin print, 31.8 x 21.3 cm, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. https://www.moca.org/collection/work/navy-recruiting-station-post-office-butte-montana.

Figure 19: Robert Frank, *Parade – Hoboken, New Jersey*, 1955, silver gelatin print, 31.3 x 47.6 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia. http://philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/65245.html?mulR=1076479606%7C1.

In *Navy Recruiting Station, Post Office – Butte, Montana* Frank has photographed the interior of a Naval recruitment office through its entry door. Using visual ellipsis to frame the Naval recruitment office limits the spectator's ability to fully perceive the space and the objects and/or individuals inside of it. The implication of this technique is that the absence of a clear or direct compositional understanding produces an anxiety for the individual viewing the image, and as a result they search for meaning in the presence of familiar elements within the work.[55] In other words, it forces the viewer to rely on the identifiable symbols, signs and objects in order to begin extracting their understanding of the image's narrative.

The primary distinguishable elements of this image are the two office desks with signs advertising "Join the Navy. Ask me about it.," the American flag on the adjacent wall, and the recruitment officer's feet in polished black shoes resting on top of his desk. Each of these compositional elements are cropped to some extent by the door's frame. The American flag is cut in half by the upper right corner of the partition and the recruitment officer's feet are bisected from his body by the door's left edge. Although the spectator can discern from the decorative features that the interior space is an office, it is nevertheless a cropped image of the space in which the viewer's understanding of the image's context is limited and confined to the door's frame.

After identifying the recognizable objects, symbols and signs in the image's composition, the individual will begin to formulate their interpretation of the image based on logical deduction as well as subjective experience. In *Navy Recruiting Station, Post Office – Butte, Montana*, the viewer can infer that the image is looking in on an office space based on the presence of desks and other office supplies visible through the door's frame. Even without knowing the image's title, the viewer could further contextualize the space as a Naval recruiting station by observing the signs on each desk that offer information on how to join the Navy. Despite the spectator's ability to rationally contextualize the image, their interpretation of its overall commentary will result from their individual experience with each of these objects or symbols. For example, if the viewer had previously served in the armed forces, they would likely interpret

the image based on their experience either with military recruitment or through the lens of their experience in active duty. On the other hand, an individual that is more critical of the United States military might understand the bisected American flag and the inferred reclining posture of the recruitment officer as indicators of Frank's disapproval towards the military. From these examples it becomes clear that Frank used this method of framing as a visual ellipsis to illicit subjective interpretations of American symbols by (presumably) American viewers throughout the series.

Another instance where Frank uses the visual ellipsis is the photograph *Parade – Hoboken, New Jersey*. The photograph consists mostly of the brick wall of an apartment complex that flattens the depth of the image and, if not for the caption, would strip away any context of place. In the absence of spatial context, the eye is drawn to the three components that transcend the wall's narrative void: the two women looking out through their windows, and the American flag. The flag both simplifies and complicates the spectator's access to the women in the photograph. On one hand, it provides a basic understanding of their location, and presumably their nationalities, but the flag also blocks the face of the woman in the far right window. In the left window, the deliberate focus on fragmentation and the subjects' inaccessibility is heightened by the blinds, that cast a dark shadow over the woman's face and blur her expression. The window frames, and the women within them, are the narrative focal points of the photograph, yet they are confined within such a limited viewpoint that the image is nearly impossible to read. Frank manipulates the frame here to challenge the viewer and complicate the interpretation, thus allowing for multiple meanings to be derived from a single image.

One interpretation derived from the visual ellipsis of *Parade – Hoboken, New Jersey* draws from Frank's interest in the act of seeing, or being seen, as a motif throughout the series. In her analysis of thematic sequences in *The Americans*, curator Sarah Greenough describes Frank's fascination with images of people looking or being looked at, and/or obscuring the viewer's ability to understand what the subjects are looking at.[56] In this particular image, Frank is using the visual ellipsis in order to problematize the viewer's gaze. When Frank captured this image he was the observer of the women, yet from the limited distinguishable features of the woman in the left hand window it appears that Frank himself was also being observed. This exchange of glances is further complicated by the viewer's perspective as it takes over Frank's line of sight. Unable to fully observe the women in their window, the spectator's gaze is rejected by the frame. Moreover, because the viewer cannot establish a complete visual understanding of the women and the context of the image, they are unable conclusively determine what the women are observing. But if the spectator, takes the woman in the left window to be looking back at Frank, then by taking over his perspective the viewer becomes the observed; and as a result of the visual ellipsis preventing the viewer from understanding the entire scene, the gaze of the woman actually overpowers them.

Frank's framing as a visual ellipsis manipulates the viewer's gaze in a manner that reflected his mission to observe the American population from an outsider perspective as seen in the opening image for the photo-series *Parade – Hoboken, New Jersey.* This also positioned the gaze of his audience to look from outside into their own culture. In a manner similar to his use of framing as a metaphor for social isolation, in *Parade – Hoboken, New Jersey* the bisected bodies of the women are confined by their windows. However, unlike the individuals in *Elevator – Miami Beach* and *Trolley – New Orleans*, the visual ellipsis produced by the window frames and the flag prevents the viewer from observing the women's reactions to their social confinement. Perhaps from Frank's perspective this photograph encompassed the underlying issues of American culture in which the overwhelming sense of national pride juxtaposed the isolated and fragmented reality of the American public. The visual ellipsis in the image also emphasizes the narrative significance of the American flag, which further limits the viewer's ability to see the women in the photograph and subsequently to formulate an understanding of who they are as individuals. The implication of this framing is that the flag – a symbol of American pride – causes the subjects to be assumed into a larger group identity that ultimately conceals the divided reality of American life.

9. Conclusion

Robert Frank's framing experiments in *The Americans* are representative of the frame's narrative, visual and compositional functions. The merging of photography with the meta-pictorial frame produced compositions that, like Renaissance framing, could enrich the central narrative with context. Frank's arrangement of the three vertically alligned postcards in *Hoover Dam, Nevada* built on the self-reflexive potential of the "essential marginal image" and commented on the mediality of photography and film. These postcards also referenced film's narrative progression in order to create a new American myth that began with the sublime landscapes of the old West and ended in the catastrophic force of the atomic bomb. In *Washington D.C. Inauguration Day* the embedded images of the presidential portraits and Frank's own smaller photographs similarly revealed the fabricated nature of the image by juxtaposing

the "realism" of the individuals inside of the store to the refined depictions of Eisenhower and Nixon. The contrast between these average citizens confined within the window frames and the poster portraits produced a dialectic between the dwindling agency of the citizen and the greater authority of the state.

In *The Americans*, Frank's framing of an individual within their environment became a visual allegory of the isolation and social division of 1950s America. *Elevator – Miami Beach* used both the structure of the elevator and the blurred profiles of the hotel visitors to visually trap the elevator attendant within her role as a young working-class woman. This image also exemplified Frank's curiosity regarding how architecture, perspective, and even other people can be used to frame individuals within the composition, and how these combined frames can reflect the structural and social isolation of the average American. His fascination with framing racial and gender inequality continued in *Trolley – New Orleans* where the horizontal sequence of the trolley windows produced an ironic correlation between the progressive nature of film rolls and rigid hierarchy of race and gender in the Jim Crow South. Moreover by using this framing method Frank was able to freeze time and permanently box the individuals in his photographs within their specific social spaces and roles.

Finally, building off of literature's ellipsis, Frank used the frame to limit the scope of vision and produce multiple perspectives from a single image. The visual fragmentation in *Navy Recruiting Station, Post Office– Butte, Montana*, forced the viewer to read the identifiable signs and symbols within the image such as the American flag, the Naval recruitment signs and the relaxed demeanor of the recruitment officer's feet in order to interpret the image. Moreover, the ellipsis produced by the office's door created a visual absence that required the audience to fill in the narrative void by projecting their own experiences onto the few items visible within the frame. The brick wall and flag in *Parade – Hoboken, New Jersey* result in a similar visual ellipsis that simultaneously distanced the viewer from the women inside of the apartment windows, while also reinforcing role of the American flag as a symbol of American unity. Despite this emphasis on a collective "American identity" assumed under the flag (as it is the only object capable of contextualizing the image), this framing method ultimately exposed the fallacy of the common misconception that there is a single stable interpretation of American culture.

Despite the compositional and theoretical differences between Frank's photography and the modernist style of painting, Robert Frank used formalist and post-modernist theory to align photography with fine art. Once Frank's photography had inserted itself into the canon of fine art, his frames became a significant step forward within the historical relationship between the frame and the image. From 1950 onwards Frank became increasingly interested in the frame's ability to embed secondary narratives or sequential characteristics into the composition.[57] Frank's interest in embedding his still images with multiple narratives foreshadowed his later autobiographical documentaries, where he broke from photography for nearly a decade. By the second half of the 1970s Frank returned to photography, but blended his interests in film and the frame by creating photomontages in his *Mabou* series (1975-) produced while he was living in Nova Scotia. *Mabou* is undoubtedly his most self-reflexive and autobiographical series yet. Much like David Hockney's composite polaroids of the 1980s, Frank has continued to combine his interest in the frame and multiple images to create film-stills of memory.[58] (Fig. 20, 21) Today, he continues to exhibit his work around the world and is regarded as one of the most influential and prolific photographers of the twentieth century.

Figure 20: David Hockney, *Photographing Annie Leibovitz While She is Photographing Me, Mojave Desert*, 1983, photographic collage, 65.72 x 156.85 cm, Collection of the Artist. http://www.davidhockney.co/works/photos/photographic-collages.

Figure 21: Robert Frank, *Mabou,* 1974, silver gelatin print, 25.72 x 31.59 cm, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York. http://www.pacemacgill.com/selected_works/detailspage.php?artist=Robert%20Frank&img_num=41.

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